CREATING A WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT

Fleeing violence disconnects individuals and families from familiar stress management strategies and creates new stresses, whether or not there are co-occurring issues such as psychiatric symptoms, disabilities or cultural issues. Details ranging from staff behavior and attitudes to the way physical space is designed can send a subtle message regarding how agencies feel about the people they serve, and can either reduce or add to stress (Prescott et. al., 2008).

“There are small actions that will plant the seed that someone truly cares,” says Daisy Barrera, an advocate from Bethel, AK. “You’re measured at all times.” Here are some ways to create a safe and welcoming environment:

• Make sure there is good security lighting outside the building.

• Have comfortable sofas and chairs, a selection of magazines, toys or coloring books for children, and coffee, tea or soft drinks on hand in the waiting area.

• Add “home-like” touches. Some inexpensive ways to make physical space more inviting include plants, fish tanks, throw pillows on couches and chairs, area rugs, and artwork on the walls (Prescott et. al, 2008). Agencies that publish a newsletter could put these items on a donations wish list.

• Pay attention to accessibility issues – enough space for people using wheelchairs or other assistive technology to move around, and items where people with disabilities can reach them (Leal-Covey, 2011).

• Keep paperwork to a minimum during initial intake sessions (Warshaw, 2010). Prioritize: What paperwork absolutely must be done right away, and what can wait until later sessions when people seeking services have had a chance to get comfortable with staff and with their surroundings?

• Ensure complete confidentiality for counseling sessions and other situations in which people seeking help will be sharing sensitive information. A private office space that allows staff to shut the door is ideal.

• In a residential setting, provide private retreat spaces other than bedrooms, such as quiet rooms or meditation gardens.

• Tell every person who enters your program, “If something here makes you feel unsafe or uncomfortable, let me/us know. We will try to make things more comfortable and safer” (Pease, 2010).
Always convey respect, in both words and actions. Advocate Daisy Barrera says:

“It’s critical for professionals to be considerate, to be respectful, to be understanding, to be supportive. Supportive can mean just being there by the person’s side. You definitely don’t always have to say anything or speak. We can spend a lot of money trying to do anything and everything to help those who are hurting. That money means nothing to an individual who is hurting until we as professionals take the time to respect, accept, and grow those big moose ears or elephant ears when a person is speaking to you” (Barrera, 2009).

References

Barrera, D. Advocate, Barrow, AK. Personal interview with Debi Edmund, November 2009.


